

# Nietzsche's love-hate affair

Are life-affirming Jews nearer to Superman than decadent Christians?

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Nietzsche's views on the Jews and Judaism remained contradictory. At times he extolled the Jews as the most vital and talented people on earth, at others he attributed all the woes of Western civilization to them. The contradiction, however, is only apparent. Nietzsche, in fact, had a consistent view about the Jews – a view that somehow managed to reconcile philo-Semitism with a profound kind of anti-Semitism. In Nietzsche's thought, the medieval demonization of the Jews, especially the picture of the Jews as subtly manipulating the innocent and naive Gentile world, survives in a peculiarly ambivalent form. It is an intellectual construction that shows a person of the highest intellect struggling, ultimately without success, to escape from the anti-Jewish myth that pervades his society.

It has often been pointed out that Nietzsche divides Jewish history into three periods. The first is the early biblical period, comprising the story of the Judges and the Kings, a period which Nietzsche regards as heroic. The second is the period beginning with the fall of the First Temple and the Babylonian exile, when the defeated Jews turned to the leadership of priests and prophets. This is the period which, according to Nietzsche, produced not only postexilic Judaism but also Christianity, two religions which he regards as one, that is, Judaeo-Christianity, which he detests. The third period is that of modern times, in which the Jews emerged as exponents of a vibrant culture, which Nietzsche greatly admires.

In the first heroic period, Nietzsche argues, the Jews, or Israelites, were a sovereign people with a proud fighting record and an ability to produce leaders of high spirit and ruthless courage. Nietzsche revelled in the Old Testament stories of Moses, Joshua, Samson, Samuel, David, Solomon, seeing these figures as analogous to the Greek heroes Achilles, Odysseus, Agamemnon and others. To Nietzsche, the most important thing in life was the will to survive, not morality, and so he saw in these stories a record of the unquenchable will. Here Nietzsche differed very widely from Voltaire, who saw in the Old Testament only primitive and barbarous cruelties, which he cited to denigrate Christianity. It was the shame of Christianity, Voltaire argued, that it based its claims on the belief that these savage records were inspired prophecies of the coming of Jesus Christ. Voltaire denounced the ancient Israelites and primitives, who did not make the slightest effort to conform to the polished ideals of the Enlightenment; while Nietzsche adored them for the very same reason.

Nietzsche, on the other hand, saw the New Testament as a sad decline from the primitive energy of the Old Testament. He wrote that it was a disgrace to print the New Testament alongside the Old in the same volume. This was because the New Testament embodied a slave morality, as opposed to the aristocratic ideal of the Old. The Old Testament contained an ideal of humanity at its best, the New Testament was written in the interests of humanity at its feeblest. It represented the revenge of the weak against the strong. Whereas Christianity represented itself as a religion of love, in which it is the duty of the strong to help the weak, Nietzsche saw in this only a drag on the progress of the human spirit, which needed to develop to the utmost its strongest and most ambitious aspects, until it brought into existence a new and higher form of life, the Superman. So, far from preserving the sick and the enfeebled, it ought to be the aim of society to weed out its less promising elements and to use its healthiest and strongest members in a programme of breeding that would result in a more perfect race. The Old Testament, wrote Nietzsche, arose from a life-affirming, yea-saying outlook; the New Testament from one that was life-denying and nay-saying, and its chief emotions were envy, resentment and desire for revenge, camouflaged as love and pity.

But this applied only to part of the Old Testament, that is the narrative part concerned with wars and martial leaders. The part that concerned the reaction of priests and prophets to the destruction of the Jewish state by the Babylonian conquerors is condemned as the foundation of the hated religion of the weak, Judaeo-Christianity. In fact, Nietzsche argues, it was the Jews who foisted on the world the slave religion that represented the revenge of the weak on the strong. They reacted to their defeat by developing a religion of defeat.

Nietzsche recognizes no break or conflict between Judaism and Christianity; both equally are motivated by envy and revenge, and both have sapped the strength of Western culture, the positive aspects of which stem wholly from the legacy of Greece and Rome. Indeed, what is wrong with Christianity is precisely its continuity with Judaism.

Yet Nietzsche vigorously asserted that the Jews of modern times were an admirable people whom he wished to include in his breeding scheme for producing the Superman, because their hereditary qualities were essential for the make-up of improved humanity. "The Jews", he writes, "are beyond doubt the strongest, toughest and purest race now living in Europe; they know how to prevail even under the worst conditions, even better than under favourable conditions, by means of virtues that today one would like to mark as vices – thanks above all to a resolute faith that need not be ashamed before 'modern ideas'." Nietzsche even believed that the great qualities of the modern Jews were in a way the result of Christian oppression. The constant suffering of the Jews had the same effect as a programme of eugenics: it weeded out the weak and left only the strong. Nietzsche was a convinced Darwinian, and saw the Jews as an illustration of Darwin's doctrine of the survival of the fittest.

Nietzsche's idea of eugenics – the breeding of the master race – was actually very different from that of the Nazis. Nietzsche regarded the master race as existing in the distant future, not in the present. He disagreed with those, such as Eugen Dühring, who believed Aryans to be a pure race of superior qualities; on the contrary, purity was something to be aimed at through a mixture of races, each of which might contribute its own best qualities, thus producing a race that was "pure" in the sense of having discarded or purged the less desirable qualities of its constituent ingredients. He thought that the ancient Greeks were a mixed race of this kind. Thus, instead of decrying German-Jewish marriages on grounds of "pollution" of Aryan blood, Nietzsche actually welcomed them, though he did say that there was a limit to the extent to which Jewish blood could be absorbed. He regarded Jewish blood as a kind of powerful medicine which could produce excellent results in small quantities.

The problem, however, arises of how Nietzsche conceived that the excellent qualities he observed in Jews had survived their long immersion in the Judaeo-Christian religion of slave morality which he so despised. His division of Jewish history into three stages leaves it difficult to understand how present-day Jews could be anything but despicable.

This question brings us to the core of Nietzsche's peculiar conception of the nature of the Jews. He expressed it in the following passage:

Psychologically considered, the Jewish people are a people endowed with the toughest vital energy, who, placed in impossible circumstances, voluntarily, out of the profound prudence of self-preservation, take sides with all the instincts of decadence – not as mastered by them, but because they divined a power in these instincts with which one could prevail against the world. The Jews are the antithesis of all decadents: they have had to *represent* decadents to the point of illusion; with a *ne plus ultra* of historic genius they have known how to place themselves at the head of all movements of decadence (such as the Christianity of Paul); in order to create something out of them which is stronger than any *Yes-saying* part of life.

Nietzsche is saying here something very surprising. He is saying that the Jews are the originators of Christianity, but themselves do not believe in it. They created Christianity, and also other creeds of decadence, such as modern liberalism, as weapons in their own fight for survival. "They put forward doctrines which they knew would weaken and sap the strength of their conquerors, but they themselves were far from being taken in by such doctrines. They retained the will to power and the primitive self-confidence which are so necessary for survival, but they insidiously spread a philosophy that was calculated to destroy the will and confidence of their conquerors.

This charge against the Jews might be considered the ultimate in

anti-Semitism, since it accuses them not merely of originating a pernicious view of life, but of spreading it like poison gas in such a way as to harm their opponents but not themselves. How did Nietzsche arrive at this extraordinary fantasy?

The answer lies in a mixture of theory and personal experience. Nietzsche was strongly opposed to Christianity, which he regarded as anti-life, because of its emphasis on humility, its denigration of this world, its other-worldly orientation and its dismissal of physical vigour and beauty as unimportant. But Nietzsche was the heir of the Voltairean tradition that blamed all the defects of Christianity on Judaism, and which delighted in dismaying Christians by stressing their affinity to the Jews, whom they had oppressed and despised; thus saddling Christians with what was to them the greatest insult. Nietzsche in many of his writings follows this Voltairean line, attacking Christianity because it is so Jewish.

On the other hand, Nietzsche's personal experience made it impossible for him to maintain this line. He found that he liked the Jews whom he came across, while he hated the anti-Semites. He found the Jews to be yea-sayers and life-affirmers, while the anti-Semites were nay-sayers and life-deniers, seeking consolation for their own inferiority feelings in hatred of the Jews. He began to see the members of the anti-Semitic movements, including his own sister, Elizabeth, as the true followers of the negative aspects of Christianity, motivated by resentment of others' success and desire for revenge for their own inadequacies. The Jews, on the other hand, such as the talented and irrepressible Heine, he saw as bursting with vitality and hope for the future.

Nietzsche's solution, then, was to absolve the Jews of the taint of actual belief in the despised religion of Judaeo-Christianity. If they really believed in this religion of life-denial, they could never have retained such vitality through the centuries or displayed such unconquerable will to survive. They must be playing a deep game, infecting their opponents with the virus of life-denial so that eventually they, the Jews, would come out on top. Already this game was succeeding, for the Jews, as represented by the Rothschilds and other Jewish capitalists, were in the process of taking over power in the modern world.

**Thus a thinker who, in a way, was most appreciative of Jewish characteristics, evolved a theory that can claim to be the most anti-Semitic of all. The Jews, in this theory, conform to the stereotype of ancient Hellenistic anti-Semitism, as "the enemies of mankind". The Jews are plotting a terrible revenge on the Gentile world, not out of a spirit of spiteful revenge and resentment, but as a long-term, far-seeing strategy of survival and victory. For this, Nietzsche, the despiser of ordinary bourgeois morality, has the greatest admiration. This is the truest model of the will to power which he sees as the apex of human virtue.**

If Nietzsche had taken the trouble to examine Judaism as a religion different from Christianity, he might even have found qualities that had some affinity to his Nietzschean philosophy. The Jewish this-worldly tradition of humanism ought to have produced a response in a thinker whose chief polemic was against other-worldly doctrines that reduced the status of humanity by requiring an abject posture of guilt and self-accusation.

If Nietzsche did not respond to Judaism, many Jews responded to Nietzsche. The first book on Nietzsche was written in 1890 by Georg Brandes, the Danish Jewish critic, whose original name was Morris Cohen. This book, published in Germany, was the beginning of Nietzsche's world-wide fame. Many of the Jews who embraced Nietzschean ideas were marginal Jews (*Grenzjuden*) who were seeking an identity and sense of authenticity after the loss of religious faith and severance from the Jewish community; but it can be argued that these Jews were enthusiastic about Nietzsche precisely because they found in him, in an atheistic form, qualities and values that were recognizable as consistent with the Jewish spirit. Among such Jews were Stefan Zweig, Jakob Wassermann, Walter Benjamin, Franz Rosenzweig, Karl Kraus, Sigmund Freud, even Gershom Scholem.

Zionism, mainly through Martin Buber, was strongly influenced by Nietzsche. Many young Zionists responded to Buber's Nietzschean call for "a transvaluation [*Umwertung*] of all aspects of the life of the people to its depth and very foundations.... We must unlock the vital powers of the nation and let loose its fettered instincts." Gershom Scholem, by reviving the Jewish tradition of

mysticism, aimed also to "let loose the fettered instincts" of the Jewish people while anchoring them in their own tradition. Buber himself, in his later life, followed this path too, by his researches into Hasidism, and his poetic reconstructions of its teachings. Both Buber and Scholem, it might be said, were seeking to revive and foster the Dionysian aspect of Judaism.

In tracing the influence of Nietzsche on Jewish individuals and movements, however, it is possible to lose sight of the fact that Nietzsche was also an influence on the surge of anti-Semitism that led up to Hitler. Nietzsche's thesis that the Jews were engaged in a plot against humanity by spreading ideas which they themselves did not believe, in order to debilitate others, is echoed in later anti-Semitic theory, but without the admiring tone with which Nietzsche invested it.

What is particularly remarkable about this kind of theory is the power and centrality that it allots to the Jewish people. The anti-Semite believes that the Jews are a unified entity that co-ordinates its plans on a global scale. Nothing will disturb the anti-Semite's conviction that the Jews are a unified and powerful force at all times. This conviction has even worked occasionally to the advantage of the Jews, as in the case of the Balfour Declaration, which, as recent research has shown, would never have been made without the erroneous belief that the Jews were a formidable world power who needed to be enlisted in the cause of the Allies.

Nietzsche's ideas about the Jews partake of this paranoid concept of the Jews as a world power. The Jews occupy a place in his thoughts that far transcends the actual influence of the Jews in the world of his day. He accepts that there is such a thing as the "Jewish problem", which is fateful for the future of Germany and Europe. There was actually no Jewish problem, but only a problem of non-Jews who saw every slight amelioration in the position of the Jews as a frightening threat. If a few Jews, such as the Rothschilds, achieved personal power and wealth, this was seen as a threat from the Jews to take over the whole world. If some Jews (or even ex-Jews or marginal Jews) such as Felix Mendelssohn or Heinrich Heine achieved fame in the cultural world, this was a takeover in which Germanic values were being swamped by a Jewish conspiracy. If Jews obtained places in the universities beyond what might have been expected statistically, this meant that Germany was being dominated by the Jews and would soon be a province in a Jewish world empire, unless drastic measures were taken. Already the note of genocide was being sounded (by Dühring and Marr) as the only solution to the threat.

From where does this paranoia derive if not from the Christian myth about the Jews? This was no longer believed in its original form, but was assuming various unconscious disguises. In the Christian myth, the Jews are very powerful. They are the powers that be, stern father figures, who judge and condemn the young Jesus, who is emblematic of the helplessness of the young. No matter how powerless the Jews might be in reality, they remained powerful in the fantasy that still dominated the world that had once been Christendom. This accounts for the strange fact that the Nazis, in their campaign of genocide of an unarmed people, regarded themselves as being very brave. They were pitting themselves against the greatest and most dangerous world power, that of the Jews.

Nietzsche struggled to see the Jews as they really were, and to some extent succeeded. He was impressed by the talent and spirit of the modern Jew. But he was still dominated by the Christian myth in that he saw Jews as a world power who might take over the world altogether, a *dénouement* which he half welcomed but also feared. This man who fought all his life against what he regarded as the negativity and life-denying quality of Christian doctrine, was himself still partly an unconscious believer in the Christian myth, who handed on concepts that were utilized by the anti-Semites whom he despised.

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